

West Sussex

Winter 2010

Arrival

It was about twelve o'clock as I stood looking down from the high point on the estate road at the centuries-old Downview Hall. It brooded there, austere and solemn under the darkening sky. A blustery wind was rising, and light snow began to swirl down from the dirty grey clouds overhead. A great forest surrounded the building on three sides and covered many miles before finally thinning out at the foot of the high downland. I had answered an advert in the local paper for a caretaker to look after the place for a month while the owners, a Mr. & Mrs. Da Silva, were abroad. The house had a troubled reputation; an old boy in the local pub had told me that it was haunted, and unexplained phenomena had been witnessed there over the years. What the next few weeks held for me in this remote and somewhat foreboding corner of the county was uncertain. The wind had risen to a near-gale-force northeasterly by this time, and shivering as the snow fell thicker, I retreated to the car for shelter. Then slowly and carefully descended the drive to my temporary home. Stepping from the vehicle in front of the Hall entrance, I gazed up at the building. It was constructed mostly of stone and spread over three floors, with four windows on either side of the massive doorway on each level. The roof was slate, and from it massive chimneys reached skyward. ‘God...it’s huge.’ I breathed softly to myself, the wind snatching my words away. I hurried up the steps to the imposing oak door, and after struggling with the key, it swung open with a shriek. Entering, I shut the door firmly behind me, leaving the winter storm to look after itself. Inside, the house was warm but dimly lit, but the snow outside gave a reflected glow, enabling me to see my surroundings fairly easily. Several rooms led off from the hall, and a huge ornate wooden staircase curved up to the first floor. I crossed to the light switches and clicked them on. To my relief, the room brightened up; at least the electric supply was okay. But I had my doubts about how reliable it might prove to be. Especially with a snowstorm raging outside and set to remain for up to a week, according to the forecast. As I left my belongings on the kitchen table, I noticed an envelope with ‘Jim’ written on it propped up against the work surface. I decided to read it later and returned to the hallway and opened the nearest door. It was a library, furnished in an old-fashioned style. The walls were wood-paneled, and on two sides shelves were stacked floor to ceiling with books. One section stood apart; the subject matter didn’t cheer me much—all dealt with the occult and magic. As I stood perusing the dusty old volumes, the lights suddenly flickered, dimmed, and went out. At the same time, the door swung slowly shut. Standing there in the gloom, a faint feeling of fear crept over me. “It’s just the wind,” I said out loud, trying to reassure myself, “and these bloody electrics have got to be sorted out!” I crossed to the door; it opened easily enough, and passing back into the hallway, the lights came on full and bright. I sat down at the hall table and thought for a while. Flickering lights and a door closing of its own accord could easily be explained; the storm outside was severe, the power supply unreliable, and the house was not exactly draftproof. I wasn't ready just yet to put these things down to ghostly causes, despite the building's history. I flicked idly through the pile of magazines and papers that cluttered the tabletop; underneath them were some bills and receipts, and one caught my attention. 'Sussex Electrical,' it read, and was dated about a year ago. This was a lucky coincidence; a call to the owners to check it was okay

to get the firm in would be top of my to-do list. Hopefully the local roads wouldn't be too snowbound, and they could come and check the place out.

I decided to go over the rest of the house and slowly climbed the winding staircase to the first floor. Opening a door at random, I peeked inside; it was furnished in the same dated style as the library and didn't look very inviting. The top level was similar, and after some thought I settled on a large room with a decent enough bed to use for my stay in this eerie old pile. It was at the rear of the hall, and the view from the windows was impressive. The park climbed gradually up until it reached the boundary of the dense forest. Everywhere was now thickly covered with snow, and the trees swayed wildly in the blustery wind, which I could faintly hear roaring through the branches. A loud thump made me start and turn around sharply to stare out of the door, which stood ajar. Venturing onto the landing, I looked up and down the corridor, but nothing was to be seen. An odd effect now occurred; as I stared down the long passage, it seemed to lengthen and grow darker, and my eyes found it difficult to focus with any clarity. Getting tired, I thought, and with a shudder returned to the bedroom window. From the corner of my eye I caught a movement at the edge of the wood and thought I saw a dark figure half-hidden among the trees. At the same time, I heard the sound on the landing once more and averted my gaze; when I looked again, the figure was gone, if it had even been there at all. The place was starting to make me jumpy and play with my imagination, and the surroundings were creepy enough to invite the unwanted thoughts that were forming in my mind. A coffee and a smoke were needed, so I descended to the ground floor, stopping on the way down twice to listen, but heard nothing more. The kitchen was bright and cheery, in sharp contrast to the other rooms. It was well stocked with food and drink; my hosts had evidently made sure my stay would be adequately catered for. I was thankful for this; getting out to the local village for more provisions would be nigh on impossible at present. I had the owner's Range Rover at my disposal, but the roads were probably close to impassable by now, and I wasn't overly keen to try venturing out in it. They would be less than pleased if I left their expensive vehicle stranded miles from anywhere! I made a call to the electricians; they doubted a visit would be possible due to the adverse weather conditions but promised to check things for me when the roads improved. I sat back in my chair and lit another cigarette; the coffee was good and the room warm and comfortable. The ground floor was generally well heated; upstairs was chilly, but I preferred a cool bedroom. The cost of keeping a place this size at a tolerable temperature in winter was doubtless considerable. I set up my laptop on the spacious kitchen table and then read the note left for me by the owners. It contained a short list of things to attend to in their absence along with the Wi-Fi code and ended with the words 'Thanks Jim...enjoy your stay, Mark Da Silva.' I was attempting to write my first book, a ghost story ironically enough. Progress so far had been slow; hopefully the surroundings and atmosphere would provide some much-needed inspiration. The four weeks' employment had appealed to me from the first, as it gave me seclusion and peace and quiet to give the project my full attention. A world away from modern life and all its inherent distractions. I decided to take a walk through the estate; the wind was still blowing hard, but the snow had eased slightly. The half-glimpsed figure at the forest edge, real or imaginary, still bothered me. I would walk up to the park and have a good look around. So after changing into my warmest jacket and a sturdy pair of boots, I set off. A huge drift had blown up against the front door, and the cars were buried beneath wintery blankets. The gale was bitter out of the northeast, and the light snow stung my eyes. However, after rounding the corner of the Hall, I found it slightly less ferocious, as the building afforded some degree of shelter from the icy blast.

The grounds were extensive, and several majestic old oak trees roared in the squally gusts. Progress up the incline to the woodland boundary was slow and laborious. Having gained the tree line, I trudged slowly along, peering into the dense dark interior. The wildly swaying boughs and hissing wind made me shudder; the aura given off by this desolate place was unfriendly...sinister even. As I stared intently into the forest depths, two sharp cracks sounded, but nothing could be seen. In my heightened state of unease, it made me think of footsteps on dead branches. By now dusk was coming on, and as I stood looking down at the Hall, I noticed a curious thing: a light shone from one of the ground floor windows, possibly the library. I was certain I hadn't turned any on while exploring the rooms that morning. Deciding to check things out at once, I set off down the hill. The snow had begun to fall heavily again and whirled crazily about in the tempestuous wind that hadn't eased all day. A wild night was in prospect, and hot food and a warm bed were all I needed at this point. Glancing up at the house as I walked towards it, I pulled up short suddenly. For a moment I couldn't think what had brought me to such an abrupt halt, and then realization dawned...the house was in total darkness. Kicking away the drift that had once again accumulated against the front door, I entered the hallway and stood for a moment getting my breath back after the hard trek down from the disquieting forest. To my relief the lights were working despite the atrocious weather conditions, and the heating was on, so cheered by the comfortable surroundings, I crossed the hallway and entered the library. Nothing seemed out of place; tonight, however, I would sleep here. The huge sofa would make a more than adequate bed, and the cozy kitchen was just across the hall. I stood at the window and stared out at the great wood at the top of the rise. But all was dark in the late afternoon gloom. The unexplained illumination would have to remain a mystery for now. I enjoyed a late supper and passed an uneventful night. Only the turbulent gusts outside roused me occasionally. I slept well and rose at first light to face a second day in the snowbound old mansion. Sitting at the drawing room table, I lit a cigarette and sipped my coffee. The view from the window was wintry in the extreme. Dark snow clouds scudded swiftly across the sky, driven on by the blustery wind. The conditions were, if anything, worsening, with no letup forecast for days to come. At some point I would have to try to reach the village for more provisions. The kitchen supplies wouldn't last the month I had agreed to look after the house. So, with this thought in mind, I ventured out to clear the snow off the vehicles. I would then run the engines for a while to keep the batteries well charged. Extracting the cars from the deep drifts took a lot longer than anticipated. But eventually I was able to climb into the owner's Range Rover, breathing heavily after my exertions. With fingers crossed, I turned the key in the ignition, and to my great relief, the motor roared into life. As I sat letting the engine come up to temperature, I noticed a row of what looked like converted stables and remembered being told that the cars were usually garaged there when not in use for any length of time. With the snow once more falling heavily, I decided to move them under cover immediately, as by the following morning they would doubtless need digging out again. With that done, I stood for a moment wondering what to do next and decided to walk up the long winding drive to the Hall gates and see whether the access road was at all passable. On reaching the entrance, I glanced up and down the lonely lane; it was desolation itself. Obviously no vehicle had a hope of getting through the deep drifts at present. At this, the highest point of the estate, the wind had reached gale force. The woods roared, branches clashing together, and the snow flew nearly horizontally. The bitter conditions were too much, and so I began the treacherous walk downhill to the house, the storm thankfully at my back and hustling me along the icy track. After several minutes of unsteady progress down the slippery incline, I stopped in an attempt to light a cigarette. As I reached into my pocket for the lighter, a strange

feeling of apprehension washed over me. Something had changed, and looking back up at the Hall gates, it seemed as though I had barely covered any distance at all since starting for the house. And indeed the old building appeared almost as far away as when I set off. Through the thickly falling snow it looked hazy, unfocused, like a desert mirage. Thoroughly unsettled, I glanced back at the way I had come and started violently as I beheld again the dark figure at the forest's edge. It stood motionless, clad from head to foot in black fluttering garments. A hood obscured the features, and whether it was male or female was impossible to judge. Just then a furious gust blew snow into my face, stinging my eyes and making them water profusely. When they cleared sufficiently to allow me to see again, I gazed in disbelief at what I saw: a second figure had joined the first. It, too, was cloaked in the same dark clothes but appeared slighter in build and shorter. A man and woman, possibly, and both were observing me implacably. Panic gripped me, and as I turned to run for the Hall, I slipped and fell heavily in the thick snow. Rising unsteadily to my feet, bruised and shaken up, I looked again in their direction and saw ...nothing! Shaking I fumbled a cigarette from the packet and, with trembling hands, lit it, drawing the smoke deep into my lungs. The house was again in focus and sharply outlined against its wooded background. The distance to it had perceptibly shortened from what I had thought only moments earlier. Despite an almost overwhelming urge to return to the safety of the Hall, I forced myself to stand my ground and think things through. Did these beings, whatever they were, have power over one's perception, and could they influence the local environment? Their appearance and disappearance seemed to suggest this possibility, as witnessed by me personally. Could I be viewing the Hall and estate from the perspective of another time and space at the point of their materialization? What was their connection with the house? Had they been summoned there by occult means? The books in the library clearly indicated a strong interest in the subject, maybe more than just curiosity. Perhaps real magical work had been practiced here either in recent times or further back in the estate's past. Then again, were they perhaps once the owners, now trapped in a never-ending limbo to forever roam the place, unable to move on? My initial skepticism was slowly being eroded, and I realized that I was now coming more and more under the influence of this forgotten old manor buried deep amongst its haunted domain. With one last glance at the spectral forest, I continued on to the Hall, my mind full of otherworldly thoughts. That evening I sat at the kitchen table with coffee, cigarettes, and a decent brandy. I wondered what my next move should be. I was somewhat reluctant to contact the owners about the events of the last two days. They would no doubt plead ignorance on the subject if, as I half suspected, they had brought about the ghostly phenomena by their own device. But then again, they could be entirely blameless, and maybe I was the only one able to see the apparitions. So instead I decided to contact an old friend who had a deep interest and extensive experience in such matters. After emailing him with all the pertinent details, I sat back in my chair smoking, lost in thought. An idea occurred to me: if the figures had a connection to the house, a thorough investigation of the place might reveal something to reinforce this theory. The house had many pictures on its walls; maybe these could provide a clue to the mystery. I decided to do this the following morning; prowling about the gloomy manor at night wasn't ideal, and full daylight would make the task a lot easier. My phone rang, shattering the hush of the kitchen and making me jump. It was my friend Tom, and he was full of questions regarding my somewhat cryptic email. After assuring him that I was ok, he told me to tell him the name of the house and its location along with all that had occurred since my arrival at the estate. He listened to everything I had to say without uttering a word, and when I was finished, he began to speak. He knew of the Hall, and its reputation as a troubled house stretched back far into the

past. The owners, from present times to centuries gone by, had not been held in any great esteem, and many charges of black magic and devil worship had been whispered by frightened villagers down through the years. And the place was mostly shunned by the local inhabitants. I was dumbfounded; I had no clue as to what kind of contract I had entered into, and what my friend Tom had told me was thoroughly unsettling. I had to ask, did he think the present occupants had carried on the sinister practices from times gone by? By way of answer he quoted a line from a well-known horror story that ‘evil houses attract evil people.’ This troubled me even more, and I asked him point-blank what my next course of action should be. ‘Leave tomorrow,’ he said. ‘No ifs or buts, Jim, just get out.’ Telling him that I was reluctant to do this and wished to investigate further didn’t go down well. ‘Listen,’ he said, ‘I know a great deal more about this business than you ever will, and I’ve given you my advice.’ ‘If you must stay, keep in close contact with me at all times.’ ‘Weather permitting, I’ll try to get down to you as soon as possible.’ After wishing me well, he hung up, leaving me in a sea of worry and doubt and wondering how to proceed next. Assuming I didn’t decide to do as he wished and leave this snowbound estate of dark fears as soon as possible.

Early in the morning of the third day I started on my exploration of the Hall, searching for any possible clues that could give me a better understanding of what I was now dealing with. Outside the wind still howled through the estate, and dark snow clouds were gathering in the northeast once more. Another heavy fall seemed imminent, and travel was now impossible even if I had decided to leave at short notice. Tom had rung to check I was ok and told me that he was totally snowed in and had no chance of visiting at present. This news increased my feeling of isolation further, and I had to face up to the fact that for now I was practically a prisoner in this house of shadows and unknown dread. With difficulty, I shook off the anxiety and climbed to the top floor to start my search. The rooms yielded little to help in my quest for some understanding into the history of the place. Many portraits adorned the walls, but despite studying them closely, I could see little of any use that might provide a link to what I was witnessing. Eventually I moved down to the first floor and resumed searching once more. One room appeared to be in use, and personal possessions were placed on the bedside tables, evidently the owner’s own bedroom.

Frustratingly, there were no photographs of any sort that could have at least given me an idea of what my employers looked like. Strange, this, I thought, but nothing surprised me anymore in this strangest of places. As I stood musing, a large picture hanging above the fireplace drew my attention. It was a landscape view of the rear of the Hall with the great forest as a background. I inspected it closely; again, nothing seemed of note, not even any people to give it life. But wait...was there the suggestion of a faint outline of two figures half hidden in the tree line? I peered intently at the place in the picture and realized that this was the very spot I had walked along only hours earlier. The unknown artist had obviously intended to give the likeness a blurred, ill-defined quality. This was a revelation to me, proof that showed a definite connection to what I had seen the previous day. At the bottom of the canvas was a date, 1810, exactly two centuries ago. How far back in time had this place been troubled by its unearthly visitants? I took several photos of the painting; having a record confirming the truth of my ghostly sightings was essential, and these I would mail to Tom without delay. Spurred on by this discovery, I continued my search on the first floor, but nothing more of significant interest was to be found. Descending to the ground level, I made straight for the library; if any room was likely to yield any further information to help me, this would be the one. The occult volumes had to be my first line of inquiry; who knew what these might reveal? My phone pinged just as I was carrying a selection

of books to the table. Tom had received my photos and was intrigued with what they revealed. He promised to continue his own investigations and would be in touch directly with any new information. I sat down and started to look through the volumes I had selected. All were dusty with age, the pages yellowed and brittle. Many were dated from several centuries ago and printed in Latin, not a very helpful start, I thought; I hadn't a hope of being able to decipher these ancient old tomes. Rising from my chair, I once more scanned the shelves, seeking anything that could assist me in gaining further help to unravel the mystery that I was immersed in. I noticed a book that had hitherto escaped my attention; it was much smaller than all the rest and had been hidden by the volumes I had removed. I drew it out and turned it over in my hands. It wasn't a printed work, but something much different. And as I opened it to the first page, a surge of excitement ran through me. It was an old notebook, very thin, due to many pages having been ripped out. The few that remained were filled with dense, spidery handwriting. This was indeed something that could very possibly be of great assistance, and I carried it back to the table, eager to peruse its contents. Glancing outside, I noticed the snow had once again begun to fall thickly. This was getting serious; my window of escape from this place now teetered on the brink, and if I delayed any longer it would be impossible. But, as I reminded myself, it had been my choice to stay, so I would have to live with it and make the best of the situation.

I turned my attention to the notebook; the few pages that remained held no clues, just mundane family matters. However, at the end I found these two brief paragraphs....

12th January 1901

I have seen them again while walking with my dog along the forest edge. Freezing weather still grips us, and thick snow carpets the estate, with a wind biting and blustery. I had stopped to light my pipe when the sensation I have come to know as the herald of their appearance came upon me. As before, a giddiness took hold, and my surroundings swam before my eyes; the grounds and Hall, appearing as if shrouded in fog, stretched and distorted. I knew they would be there before I even looked along the tree line. And there they stood, vaguely defined, immovable as always, gazing at me implacably, though their features were hidden under the heavy hoods that covered any detail of a face. I have yet to see them anywhere else on the estate; they seem rooted to this location like statues, unable to move from their allotted space in time. Forever trapped in this domain until the wrong dealt to them by my forefathers is righted. The burden has fallen on me, and now I must make amends. The dog barked furiously; I know he sees them, and this shook me from my musings with a start. Even before I looked, I knew the figures would be gone, and so it was; the spell broke, and my surroundings came back into a natural, healthy view once more.

13th February 1901

My efforts have been in vain. I am unable to release the poor souls from their earthly prison. My health is failing, and I know the time left to me is short. For so many years I have done nothing to right this terrible wrong. Mostly through fear and cowardice. And now I know I never will. I leave these few lines for those who come after me. I pray they will eventually settle this injustice once and for all. The forest holds the key; of that I am certain. Search there and endeavor to...

Here the writing finished abruptly; I was frustrated that no explicit details of the crime done to these poor unfortunates were recorded. Why had the author left his notes unfinished? What had interrupted him? The missing pages probably held more information regarding the mystery, but it was a major breakthrough nonetheless and hopefully would assist me greatly. I slowly closed the notebook and sat back, amazed by what I had just read. I would ring Tom with these new revelations tomorrow when he returned home from a business trip to London. Furthermore, I had a definite theory forming in my head and was keen to know if he thought I was on the right track. After a coffee and smoke in the kitchen, I once again ventured out into the frigid grounds, heading for that now familiar location. The snow was so thick it made progress slow and tedious. Would this arctic blast ever end? Eventually I gained the forest's edge and walked slowly along, watching and listening intently. A flock of jackdaws shot overhead, calling loudly to each other. I watched them swoop down towards the Hall and land on the roof, where they strutted about excitedly. I was taking my cigarettes from my pocket when a tremendous gust blew the packet from my freezing fingers. Rushing to retrieve them, I bent down, and the world swam before my eyes. Again the hall and grounds had stretched and lengthened in aspect, the house murky and indistinct. I turned to face the woods, and there they were. Rooted in place amongst the wildly swaying trees. I took several paces towards them, fear abandoned now. Only a wish to assist these unfortunate shades of trapped souls. Although I had moved, I was no nearer to them. The distance between us remained fixed in time. In frustration, I shouted loudly...“What do you want from me?” ‘Let me help!’ I held my breath, watching for any sign that they could understand my intentions were honorable. After what seemed like an interminable pause, the smaller figure raised an arm and pointed back into the forest. I stared in the direction indicated and tried in vain to move closer. As I did, my eyes blurred, then cleared, and my surroundings, as on the previous day, came back into their normal perspective. I was alone once more amongst the snow and roaring wind. I made a marker from fallen branches so the exact spot could be easily found again. I would return in the morning and make a thorough search for any clues to solve the mystery once and for all. In the morning Tom rang to check on me and deliver some astounding new information. He could now reveal the crucial missing pieces of the puzzle regarding the fate of the wronged specters. In the late seventeen hundreds, a brother and sister in their early twenties were part of the staff at the Hall and, according to Tom’s in-depth research, had lost their lives in a botched occult ritual. According to his sources, they hadn’t been willing participants. In a panic the owners and other members of the circle quickly buried them in an unspecified location somewhere on the estate grounds. The scandal had somehow been hushed up, probably through bribery or threats of violence. Lords of the manor had been powerful figures during this time, and no criminal charges were ever made. Tom then asked the question I knew was coming: what did I intend to do next? I would search the place in the forest that was marked for any evidence of a burial. A little over three weeks remained until the Da Silvas were due to return; after that, any further investigation was out of the question. I’d come this far; at the very least I had to try to find a solution to the centuries-old injustice. Tom received my plan of action without enthusiasm, advising me to be very careful how I proceeded. ‘If you come a cropper in that forest and injure yourself, you’ll be properly screwed.’ ‘No-one will be able to help you, and freezing to death if you’re unable to get back to the Hall is a real possibility.’ Weather conditions in his part of the country had improved slightly, and he could possibly try to get to me in a day or so. Could I wait until he got there? I thanked him for his concern, but I was determined to explore immediately. ‘Ok, he said, take care, and for god’s sake make sure you have your phone with you.’ I hung up and sat back in my chair, deep in thought. About five

hours of daylight remained, long enough for at least a cursory look around the location I had marked. Twenty minutes later I was on my way to that known place. I carried a small rucksack over my shoulder, containing two phones, one being a backup device I had retrieved from my car, a bottle of water, and some snacks. Tom's warning of possible mishaps in the forest hadn't been completely ignored. The weather was still atrocious, the snow and biting wind held sway, and no improvement seemed likely in the short term. I struggled up the incline to the forest's edge, cursing the elements loudly. Having gained the woodland perimeter, I stood for a while regaining my breath; it had been a hard slog from the house. I found the marker easily enough, and after a brief glance back at the hall, I stepped into the dark interior. Walking beneath the howling trees, I looked closely for any sign of disturbed ground. Everywhere was covered with fallen branches and thick undergrowth, and I tripped over more than once. Tom's warning about possible mishaps in this storm-blasted place hit home, and I continued very cautiously. I searched fruitlessly for over an hour, and when I finally stopped for a cigarette and some water, I was deep within the forest. The light had begun to fade, and realizing how far I had to walk to regain the boundary, I started back, struggling through the deadfalls but still alert for anything that might be a clue to help solve this strange mystery I was enmeshed in. Pushing through yet another tangled thicket of snow-covered bushes, I came upon something that looked significant. A rectangle of noticeably flatter ground presented itself, fairly clear of undergrowth and obviously not a natural feature. This could be the breakthrough I had hoped for and would be the focal point of the investigation. I took several photos of the area for Tom's benefit, then walked gingerly over the level earth. It was frozen solid, and any digging would probably be next to impossible without some warmer weather to assist me. The next problem was finding the place again; we could easily walk in circles amongst the dense woods and still not find it. A possible solution occurred to me: extracting the backup phone from my rucksack and checking its battery and ringtone volume. I placed it in a small carrier bag and fastened it to the bushes securely. Hopefully it would survive the coming night and allow us to ring it the following day. Nearing the forest edge, I once more caught my foot in a tangled clump of broken wood and fell heavily, twisting my ankle and bruising my knees. I rose unsteadily to my feet, but despite the pain, I was able to walk without too much trouble; a broken bone would be potentially disastrous, and a safe return to the house was now my priority. Before leaving I made another marker to assist us the following day. I reached Downview after what seemed like an endless journey and stood in the warm hallway, bruised and sore but thankful I had accomplished my search relatively unscathed. Later, snug in the cozy kitchen with my customary brandy and cigarettes, I rang my friend and brought him up to speed with the latest developments. He was relieved I had escaped any serious repercussions and praised me for having the courage to undertake the perilous venture at all. He was intrigued with the pictures of the level ground and felt that this must be the clue that might explain the whole unearthly mystery. The wintry weather in his part of the country was easing, and temperatures were rising, so he was hopeful that in possibly forty-eight hours he could be with me. A colleague with extensive knowledge in such matters had suggested to him a possible solution that was well worth trying. "I'll tell you all about it when I see you," he remarked somewhat cryptically. I mused over our conversation for a long time, intrigued as to what this might be. Wholesale excavations at the newly found landmark seemed highly unlikely to me given the frozen ground, and at present I couldn't remotely imagine what the new idea might be. Exhausted, I went to bed; everything ached, but I was slightly more cheerful. Maybe events were turning a corner and the end to this strange affair was in sight. The following morning brought a welcome surprise: the sun shone brightly from a cloudless sky. The wind had dropped, and no

snow had fallen the previous night. I stood on the Hall steps with my coffee, enjoying the dramatic change in the weather; the air felt softer, and the huge icicles hanging from the roof dripped steadily. A warm front from the southwest was moving in, and a big thaw seemed imminent. However, the forecast predicted only a temporary reprieve from the icy conditions, and more snow was expected. Today I would concentrate on some chores about the estate; come what may, I still wanted the fee agreed on for my month's tenancy. Later I would have another look around at the forest's edge and see if anything fresh was evident. By early afternoon I had finished all that needed doing and decided to walk up to the newly marked location. The change in temperature was dramatic; the snow was melting fast, and the parkland was exposed in places, making progress easy. I was keen to find out if my phone had made it through the night and made straight to the boundary. Walking in what I hoped was a reasonably straight line, I rang the backup phone. At first I heard nothing, but after more unsteady progress, a faint sound came to my ears. Gaining ground, the unmistakable ringtone echoed through the trees. I hurried forward and in a short time emerged from the tangled trees into the clearing. After checking that the phone had sufficient power to last another night, I returned to the house full of hope; for the first time since my arrival, I felt as though fate had at last dealt me a winning hand. That evening Tom rang and announced his intention to visit the following day. The roads had improved greatly, and he expected to be with me in the morning. This was really good news; having my friend with me to attempt what could prove to be the last effort at freeing these wronged siblings was a huge boost to my well-being.

The next day brought an unexpected call from Mark Da Silva; they were returning early to attend to an important family matter that needed immediate attention and anticipated being home in two days. This came as something of a shock; the time remaining to us was just forty-eight hours. At eleven Tom arrived, and we greeted each other warmly; he'd had a good journey, and the local roads were fairly clear of snow and ice. I told him about Da Silva's call, but he didn't seem overly bothered. 'What has to be done won't take long,' he said, and we can start anytime you wish. 'Let's go inside,' I suggested, 'and you can tell me all about it.' Seated at the kitchen table with coffees, Tom outlined his plan of action. A colleague who had extensive experience with situations like ours had given Tom a spoken ritual that could hopefully be used to enable our trapped souls to move on. It was short and needed no great in-depth knowledge to conduct, just a belief that it would work. I was willing to try anything at this point, and it would be our only chance; time had more or less run out to put an end to this injustice. That afternoon Tom and I stood at the forest's edge next to the branch marker. The sky had darkened, and the wind was rising, fitting to the occasion, I mused. We began walking in what I hoped was roughly the right direction, our footsteps crunching on the frozen ground, while the trees roared over our heads. After we had gone a few hundred yards, I rang my phone. We stood and listened intently; nothing could be heard. 'Let's carry on,' Tom suggested, 'We're bound to hear it sooner or later.' Dialing the number again, we ventured further into the darkening wood, our senses alert for any sound. Peering at my phone screen as we walked, I suddenly felt his hand grip my arm. 'Listen,' he said, and through the trees came the unmistakable shrill of a ringtone. I was jubilant; it had worked! Moving quickly, we soon came out into the small clearing where my phone rang loudly, still suspended in the bushes. We inspected the ground closely; nothing remarkable was visible, and the earth was as hard as steel. 'We have to try the ritual,' said Tom. 'Digging is out of the question. After composing himself, he began reading from his notebook the short banishment ritual, which was in Latin and of considerable age. I stood quietly by his

side, silently praying that this ancient text would be effective. Reaching the end, he closed his book, and we waited. A cold shiver ran through the forest as we stood beneath the howling canopy; something seemed to be building up, on an elemental level at least. After a few minutes had passed, Tom spoke: ‘Let’s go back, Jim; we’ve done all we can.’ On our return to the Hall, the wind gradually eased, and by the time we had reached the house, the sun was shining brilliantly in a clear blue sky. Early on the next day we made an extensive tour of the estate; Tom had to leave before the Da Silvas’s return. I wouldn’t be able to explain his presence at the Hall without raising suspicion in their minds. The forecast was looking ominous again; snow and blustery winds were apparently heading our way. Winter had not finished with us yet, it seemed. We walked along the entire forest boundary to where it finally ended at the Hall gates; nothing was seen or heard, only the temperature dropping was of note. ‘Has it worked?’ I asked Tom point-blank as we stood smoking on the high road. ‘We’ll never know, will we?’ he said. ‘All we could do has been done; let’s hope it’s at an end.’ By one o’clock Tom had gone, anxious to be home before the snow arrived once more, and promising to call me later. I was once again alone and hoping to be away from the place soon. Being snowed in again, and this time with the Da Silvas for company, was a prospect I didn’t relish one bit. After checking that the house was in order, I made one final visit to the woodland’s edge. All was quiet, but I didn’t like the feel of the place; it seemed different somehow, eerie and dark, and something else bothered me that I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Had we been successful? I wasn’t sure now, but I could do no more, and the Da Silvas were due back later in the afternoon, yet another change to their expected arrival time. I wondered about that. Had they somehow picked up on the events of the previous days and wanted me gone? Obviously this was just guesswork on my part, but I was determined to leave in the morning, snow or no snow. At four the couple arrived, along with a mountain of luggage and a harassed-looking cab driver. They were much older than I had imagined, very grey and tired-looking, worn out by life, it seemed. We had a late supper together, and they were not very communicative. There was something about their manner I didn’t care for, nothing specific, just vague unease on my part. By ten I was in bed, hoping that the heavy snow would hold off until after I was well away from this desolate place.

Departure

I stood on the house steps and bade farewell to the Da Silvas; they were subdued and reticent. An air of apprehension seemed to hang over them, as though their return was a duty rather than genuine happiness to be home. I noticed them looking in an uneasy manner more than once at the sinister woods at the top of the parkland. Following their gaze, I saw, or so I thought, something in the gathering gloom, just at the forest’s edge, vague and indistinct, like a desert mirage. Shaking off the notion with an effort, I picked up my bag and walked down to the car. The old couple seemed to almost sigh with relief, as though glad to see me go. Reaching the estate gates, I stopped and got out to take a last look at the Hall. It brooded there, austere and solemn under the darkening sky. A blustery wind was rising, and light snow began to swirl down from the dirty grey clouds overhead. A great forest surrounded the building on three sides and covered many miles before finally thinning out at the foot of the high downland. Shivering as the snow fell thicker, I retreated to the vehicle for shelter. Putting the car in gear, I drove away from that haunted domain, where past wrongs and shifting time and space coalesced uneasily with the concrete present. I was unsure of everything and knew that I could never return. And slowly, Downview faded from view in the mirror.

End